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ABSTRACT

This study examined the meaning of inclusion to different stakeholder groups and implications for the identification of effective educational practices for students with disabilities. Twenty individuals involved in inclusive education in urban and suburban settings were interviewed, including regular education teachers, special education teachers, teacher aides, parents, a student, school psychologists, and a pediatrician. Interviewees were asked to focus on a child who had been successfully included. Analysis of the interviews identified major themes. For educational professionals, these themes included programmatic issues, volunteerism, teacher attitude, and negotiation among school personnel. Parents saw inclusion as the "gateway" to real world experiences and social development. The student also focused on peer relationships. The school psychologist focused on the issue of measuring educational outcomes and the pediatrician stressed the need for functional outcomes to increase personal independence. An attached table cites examples of educators' and parents' attitudes on peer assistance, resources, individualized programming, professional collaboration, attitudes, and inclusion goals. (DB)

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Running Head: STAKEHOLDERS

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This project was supported in part by a Rhode Island College Faculty Research Grant. Please address correspondence to Felicia Wilczenski, Ed.D., Dept. of Counseling and Educational Psychology, 108 Adams, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908

Using Stakeholder Interviews to Evaluate Inclusive Education

Rationale:

Goals 2000 school reform initiatives challenge educators to serve diverse student populations within general education programs. As part of the reform effort, many schools have changed their approach to educating students with disabilities by developing inclusive programs that bring together students with and without disabilities. Schools are now struggling to establish a new inclusive identity while managing the day-to-day educational needs of all students.

One way to go about educational reform is to listen to individuals directly involved in inclusion (Emerson & Maddox, 1997; Jordan, Stanovich, & Roach, 1997; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, and Saumell, 1995). Inclusive education requires fundamental changes in the relationships among various school personnel, between school personnel and the community as well as those between researchers and practitioners. As children with disabilities are increasingly included in regular class settings, questions arise about how inclusive education can be successful from the perspectives of students, parents, school personnel, and others in the community. Listening to stakeholders can assist in identifying key components of successful inclusion programs and in identifying barriers to inclusion.

Children with disabilities are a vitally important yet neglected source of information about inclusion. Professionals should be concerned about how children are affected by inclusive education programs, and children with disabilities have a great deal to teach us regarding the challenges of inclusion. Parents' voices need to be heard. Many of the skills children need for successful inclusion can be learned from parents' stated expectations and experiences with support from parental teaching efforts. School personnel can tell us what instructional, management, and assessment strategies have been successful for them in ensuring meaningful inclusion. Others in the community can inform us about how to cope with the functional impact of various disabilities and assist in goal setting.

Objective:

The purpose of this study was to explore what inclusion means to different participants in an effort to identify effective inclusive education practices and to remove barriers to inclusion.

Research Questions:

1. What do various stakeholders, i.e., school personnel, parents, students, and others in the community regard as the proper basis for inclusion?

2. How do students with disabilities fare in inclusive settings? When, for whom, and under what circumstances is inclusive education effective?

3. How is inclusion carried out? How can practices be refined to achieve the goals of inclusion?

4. What are the experiences and perceptions of inclusive education by students, parents, teachers, and others invested in school reform?

5. Is there any pattern that relates stakeholders' beliefs to inclusive education practices?

Informants:

The selection of informants was guided by the idea that the ability to communicate about inclusion should have priority over the representativeness of the sample. Twenty individuals involved in inclusive education in urban and suburban settings were interviewed: regular education teachers (6), special education teachers (4), teacher aides (2), parents (2) student (1), school psychologists (2), principals (2), and a pediatrician (1).

Procedures:

As interest centered on the meaning of experience, a phenomenological approach was used. The phenomenological method of inquiry deliberately moves away from quantitative methodologies to reveal the individual meanings of human experiences. The method takes into account the individual's participation in a real world context of inclusion by using the respondent's oral descriptions as raw data. Through an analysis of descriptions, the nature and the meaning of the experience of inclusion is understood.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews to provide a qualitative measure of inclusion outcomes. The purposes of the interviews were stated broadly: stakeholders were asked to reflect on

inclusion and how it affected their lives. The stimulus question asked the respondent to "Think of a child successfully included--tell as much about the child's characteristics and circumstances as you can and speculate on the reasons for successful inclusion."

This method created a rich data base for understanding inclusion and inclusive education practices. Interviews captured real life data at a level of depth that enhanced understanding and revealed explanatory information about the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of key stakeholders.

Data Analysis:

Rigorous methods for analysis of these data were preserved using verbatim transcription of audiotapes. Descriptive statements, which conveyed an idea about the experience of inclusion, were listed. Those statements were grouped according to their common elements which described major themes. Major themes were analyzed to capture the meaning of inclusion from the perspective of various stakeholders. Reliability and semantic validity, that is, whether the categories and statements were sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of the subjects, were achieved by agreement of five raters. Coefficients of agreement were determined by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements for statements in each category. Percentages of agreement for each of the categories averaged in the nineties, ranging from 80% to 100%.

Findings:

From the descriptions provided by the informants as they explored their experiences, several themes pertaining to the context of inclusion emerged. Statements reflecting different perspectives on each theme offered by educators and parents are contained in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Educational professionals discussed successful inclusion in terms programmatic issues, especially class placement. A theme of volunteerism recurred. Including a child with a disability in a particular class was seen as extra "service" on the part of the teacher (e.g., "The teacher has to be willing to do it." "Ms. ---- volunteered to include the child."). Teacher attitude was seen as a key factor in successful inclusion. The idea of volunteering to teach a particular student is a markedly different point of view than typical class assignments for teachers. Viewing inclusive education as based on volunteerism suggests that inclusion was not an integral part of the school philosophy.

Relationships among school personnel were seen as critical for successful inclusion. A recurrent theme was that of negotiation. School personnel had to work together in new and creative ways to accommodate for the needs of a student with a disability to make inclusion possible. Often these negotiations were described as highly conflictual. One informant described inclusive education as a "battle."

Interestingly and importantly, when inclusion was unsuccessful a troubling pattern of attribution for the failure was repeated. Rather than examining contextual issues, such as attitudes or relationships, school personnel attributed the failure of inclusive education to the child's disability which "could not be accommodated" or to "parental pressure for an inappropriate program."

Parents saw inclusion as the "gateway" to real world experiences and community involvement so their goals were more social ("My child needs to learn to get along with all types of people."). Not surprisingly, peer relationships were salient to children as well. For the students, inclusive education was not always a positive experience ("Some kids are embarrassed to know me.").

In their own words, various stakeholders described experiences and expectations of inclusive education:

Student Perspectives:

When asked how he gets help with work in his inclusive classroom, John described the "Ask three, then me" approach of his teacher particularly useful. The strategy of asking three students before the teacher is designed to foster cooperation among students and to relieve student demands upon the teacher. At any given time, class members can be either helpers or helpees. John acknowledged that some of his classmates are "embarrassed" to know him, but social relationships have developed as John sees his helpers as friends. On occasion, John has been asked questions by other students.

Parent Perspectives:

A compelling question asked by John's mother: "If he was your child, where would you want him placed?" She views inclusive education systemically, that is, inclusion has implications for her disabled son, the teacher, and the other students. Staff support for the classroom teacher was seen as a critical component of successful inclusion. "To meet individual needs, the teacher must have enough help." She is concerned that John get the individualized instruction he needs. "Social acceptance is important so he will fit into the community as an adult."

Teacher Perspectives:

"Ownership" is a major issue in inclusive classrooms according to John's teacher. Clarifying the responsibilities and orchestrating the work of other professionals and paraprofessionals within one classroom was seen as a key challenge in effectively managing an inclusive classroom. "Fostering cooperation among students and collaboration among professionals are critical skills for a teacher--something I was not trained to do." Cooperative learning helped the teacher: "I need all the instructional help I can get in dealing with diversity."

School Psychologist Perspectives:

"Inclusive education forces an examination of the value of traditional testing practices for the purpose of special education classification." A school psychologist focused on the issue of measuring educational outcomes, that is, evidence of academic, social,

and behavioral goals being attained at school. "Cooperative learning structures forces us to think about new modes of assessment to address both the individual and the group collaboration outcomes."

Pediatrician Perspectives:

"Functional outcomes for personal independence for students with disabilities need to be explicitly stated and school experiences provided either in or out of regular classes that optimize those outcomes."

Significance of Study:

Inclusive education is a complex, dynamic, sociopolitical process that involves social change. Therefore, the perspectives of stakeholders, that is, students, parents, school personnel, and the community, are important in judging the success of inclusive education and in identifying barriers to inclusion programs.

In this study, the research questions centered on the meaning of inclusion for various stakeholders. When persons involved in inclusion individually spoke of their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions concerning the experience of inclusion, the personal meaning surfaced. This descriptive, exploratory study was the method of choice because it focused on the discovery of the meaning of experience through face-to-face discussions, which provided an opportunity to discover common patterns of inclusion experiences from

a number of persons who have a stake in the outcome. Clearly, the context of inclusion is critical. Conflicting goals and expectations among various stakeholders need to be sorted out and addressed. When, for whom, and under what circumstances are important considerations for successful inclusion. School psychologists can take a leading role in promoting equity and human rights can be increased by encouraging the participation of groups on the margins of society in the mainstream.

References

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Table 1

Educators' and Parents' Perspectives on Successful Inclusion

Peer Assistance

E: We incorporated him into the classroom activities by having a student be his partner for the day. The students all got to interact with him and he became more of a peer.

E: He goes down to the first grade and he acts as a peer tutor for the little first graders and he seems very receptive to that.

P: We started a buddy system for lunch where he would sit in his classroom and invite one or two of his buddies for lunch. And before you know it, every kid wanted to be invited because most kids didn't like the lunch room.

Resources

E: I had a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and a speech and language therapist as consultants.

E: The put a special education teacher right in the class to help modify the work.

P: He was in a regular first grade class. He had a personal aide and some of the other children had aides, so there could be four or five adults in this first grade. What I can't see working is a class that has 5 or 6 kids with IEPs and a teacher without support or who has not been trained.

Individualized Programming

E: Another part of the parallel curriculum was during writing time for the kids, the other kids would be working on their journals and he would be working on hand-over-hand writing.

P: He has learned relaxation techniques. When he is in a situation where he is overwhelmed he has been given permission to raise his hand, get a drink of water, regroup, and come back. This is usually all he needs. That ability to self-regulate is crucial.

Table 1 continued

Professional Collaboration

E: The key factor in the success of the program was the pre-training of the faculty, students, a paraprofessional, and a nurse. This was done before the student started. Without training, sometimes it gets fuzzy as to what the expectations are, and who's responsible for following through. I think sometimes teachers don't know what's expected of them. For inclusion to work, they need help.

P: We have been trying to plan and work as a team. We can have as many as 17 people involved in his IEP. Everyone has a piece and can see him in a different light. The teachers are very open about things and will question things.

Attitudes

E: The regular class teacher volunteered to take him.

E: His successes are due to his desire to be there.

Inclusion Goals

P: The teachers were nervous because they feel they have a curriculum each child needs to cover. We said forget that, just let him be in your classroom, let him participate on whatever level he can and let him feel part of the group. I think that took the pressure off the teacher, so she was more relaxed.

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